

HED Presentation – The Sixties

This photo (see below) was taken in May 2015 when over 200 graduates of South African Habonim gathered together on Kibbutz Tzora to celebrate the 50th anniversary of their Aliyah to Israel. The common and unifying factor of all of these people was their membership of Habonim in South Africa during a most turbulent time – the Sixties. There is no doubt that this period of our lives was a significant one and for most of us, it determined our world outlook and our future path in life. More chaverim of the movement made aliyah during this decade than in any other.

It was an incredible and turbulent time of idealism and ideology mixed with fun and wonderful experiences in a special atmosphere and comradeship which did not exist in any other framework. It created a special and unique bond which still binds us together after all this time.

Everyone from this decade has their own memories and recollections and their own opinions about the major issues at the time. I would like to highlight only two of what I think were the major trends in those years.

First of all, there was a feeling that the movement was all talk and no action and that Aliyah had to be put back on the agenda. There were many debates about the definition of “the challenge of Chalutzic aliyah” The ideological clash between the Chalutz Chug (what we called the Challies) and the “Aliyah Chug” (the Allies) led to a new definition of the highest challenge facing our members which now included other forms of collective settlement besides the kibbutz. The aliyah chug eventually dissipated although a few members were part of the effort to establish an urban kibbutz in Carmiel. We even created an Aliyah Register which senior members were asked to sign in order to declare their intention to make aliyah (a member of Habonim is a person of conviction and

action). Those who did not sign were not allowed to serve as madrichim of the senior age groups as we believed in the principle of self example.

In 1963 Garin Etgar was declared and in the 4 year period between 1965 and 1968 over 200 chaverim made aliyah through the ulpan on Tzora and via other channels. Of course the Six Day war and the resulting euphoria was an additional contributing factor when over 40 of the movements' senior leadership dropped everything overnight in order to fly to Israel as volunteers.

Aliyah to Israel at that time was seen as promising a true Jewish identity and the challenge of building a new society based on our own values and beliefs. This was an ideological Zionist aliyah but there were other factors involved as we had to face the reality of Apartheid in South Africa.

The decade of the Sixties opened with the Sharpeville riots and the movement leadership and the shlichim were convinced that this was the opening shot in the inevitable bloody upheaval and civil war which was soon to erupt and in which the Jews once again would be caught in the middle. There was a real and palpable fear of becoming involved on the one hand, a fear of remaining in the country and being caught up in what was to come on the other and this dovetailed very nicely with our Zionism and our plans for aliyah.

The late Zeev Mankowitz wrote in 1963: *"The Jews will find themselves in an untenable position and the feeling was that we had to get ready to move as many young people out of South Africa as possible."*

What about our Jewish values and the moral imperative to become part of the struggle for human rights here on our own doorstep?

As Giddy has pointed out we lived as part of the privileged White society and while advocating non involvement as a movement we continued educating our members towards an awareness of the inherent inequality and discrimination

surrounding them. There were various attempts at social activism such as physically protecting the Black Sash demonstrations, adopting schools in Soweto, participating in demonstrations at the universities etc. but we were very soon officially warned to cease all such activity.

Many of our members left the movement and became involved as individuals in the resistance to the Apartheid regime. The dilemma facing us was self preservation and non involvement versus embarking on a course of action as a Jewish youth movement thereby endangering the very existence of Habonim and perhaps also implicating the entire Jewish community. This dilemma became very real, very personal and very frightening when the Habonim offices were raided by the so called "Special Branch" both in Johannesburg and in Bloemfontein. Then following the arrest and interrogation of a number of ex Habonim members in Durban who were involved in so called "subversive activities", we received reports that part of their interrogation revolved around the structure and educational programs of Habonim. In 1966 when I was Mazkir, Alan Hoffmann (who was then Mazkir Chinuch) and I were summoned urgently to meet with Judge Issy Maisels who was requested to pass on a very direct and a very personal message from the then Minister of Justice - John Foster. Habonim and its leadership were under surveillance and the movement was in danger of being shut down completely. This threat to the movement and to our own personal security ensured that we adhered to the policy of non involvement and compliance as a movement and compelled us to revise our printed programs while continuing to inculcate the values of democracy, social equality and an awareness of the evils of the apartheid regime in our chanichim.

The Sixties were marked by the student demonstrations in Germany and France, by the Anti Vietnam demonstrations and by the Civil Rights movement in the USA with which we so clearly identified. We spent hours listening to and

singing the folk music of Pete Seeger, Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, and passed around clandestine recordings of the famous “I have a dream” speech by Martin Luther King (which was banned at that time in South Africa).

When Robert Kennedy visited South Africa and addressed the students at a huge gathering at Wits University in 1966 we felt that in a way he was challenging us when he said:” *This struggle will not be won by standing aloof and pointing a finger; it will be won by action. In the midst of this controversy and difficulty and risk it is you who have to decide*”.

But in spite of feeling that we were part of the Sixties revolution, we decided not to take that risk. Our inability to facilitate change in S.A. and the realization that this could not and should not really become our struggle, perhaps combined with the element of fear and insecurity made aliyah to Israel and in particular to the kibbutz the only realistic option to implement both our Jewish and our universal values. So as much as we opposed apartheid this was not seen as our cause and Israel offered the challenge of building a new society: “a light unto the nations.”

Today’s South Africa has changed dramatically without the bloody revolution and upheaval that we thought was inevitable. Present day Israel is certainly no longer a “light unto the nations” and is no longer the country we envisaged when we moved here in the Sixties.

As we fondly remember the Sixties, those of us living in Israel today are faced with a feeling of Déjà Vu as the ghost of Apartheid revisits us, many of the old dilemmas resurface and Robert Kennedy’s challenge faces us once again.

Thank you.

